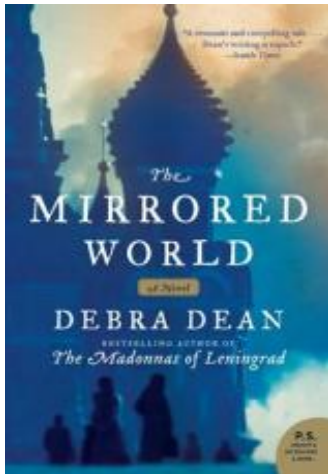


# The Mirrored World

by Debra Dean

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## About the Book

Set against the unparalleled extravagance and artifice of 18th century St. Petersburg, a world of ice palaces and opera and masquerade balls, **The Mirrored World** is the reimagined life of St. Xenia, one of Russia's most beloved holy women. Narrated from the point of view of her younger cousin Dasha, a devoted friend and companion, **The Mirrored World** follows the friends from their younger years in the lower nobility through the tragedy and madness that transforms Xenia into a revered angel of mercy to the poor and a controversial figure to the upper classes.

Dasha is a young girl in 1736 when her widowed aunt moves into their St. Petersburg home, bringing with her two daughters: Nadya and Xenia. Dasha becomes a devoted third sister, especially to Xenia, a passionate and caring dreamer. Years later, their mothers bring all three girls out into society at once, and their debut, at one of Empress Elizaveta's extravagant weekly Winter Palace balls, will change their lives forever.

On the night of their debut, Xenia falls madly in love with a singer in the empress's imperial choir, a charming and handsome soldier with friends in high places. The two marry after a whirlwind courtship, and the newlyweds welcome the painfully shy Dasha into their home. But the loss of Xenia's first child, followed by the tragic death of her beloved husband, sends the now-twenty-six year old into an excruciating, deep depression. When she does emerge after weeks in a trance-like state and still inconsolable, she empties her purse giving alms to the beggars outside church and in the square. Surrounded by the poor and the homeless, Xenia, in defiance of her family, begins giving away her possessions. She even gives her house to Dasha and the man she believes will be her cousin's husband, the city's most celebrated Italian castrato. Satisfied that Dasha is cared for, Xenia disappears from St. Petersburg.

Eight years later, much has changed for Dasha. Her own beloved husband has died, and she struggles to adapt to life as a widow. Xenia reappears in the worst slums of the city, dressed in the rags of her dead husband's military uniform, answering only to his name. A soothsayer and healer, Xenia becomes famous throughout the city, perceived by many as a sharp rebuke to the lavish excesses of the court of the new empress, Catherine the Great.

Richly told and elegantly written, **The Mirrored World** is a moving historical epic that reimagines the transformation of a regular girl into one of history's most treasured and mysterious saints.

## Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with a striking dream. What is its portent?
2. Talk about Xenia as a child, a wife, and a widow. What adjectives would you use to describe her? Was she too sensitive for the difficulties of the material world? How does Xenia compare to her sister, Nadya and her cousin, Dasha?
3. Talk about Xenia's relationship with her husband, Andrei. Can someone love too much? Is love itself a form of madness?
4. What about Dasha and Gaspari's relationship? What are the most important components of a successful marriage? Is passion necessary?
5. What are your impressions of life in eighteenth-century Tsarist Russia? How does Debra Dean bring this time and place to life?
6. After Andrei's death, Xenia tells Dasha, "I have let people starve that I might wear that lace. But I shall be naked before God." Was Xenia right to feel guilty over her privilege while so many of her fellow citizens starved?
7. Is Xenia blessed by God, or is she mentally disturbed, driven mad by inconsolable grief? Is it "crazy" for a person to give up all material possessions as she did?
8. Was there anything that Dasha or anyone could have done to help Xenia or was her transformation the true purpose of her life? Do you think Xenia found peace in her transformation?
9. Compare the Tsarist Russia of Xenia's time with our world and our own society. Despite the obvious differences, do you see any similarities?
10. How would a person like Xenia be viewed today? Is most of the modern world too cynical to believe in miracles? Do you believe in miracles? Xenia has become one of Russia's most revered saints. What makes someone a saint? What do you think of Xenia?
11. What are the challenges and rewards of long friendship? Have you had a friend who changed dramatically, and how did you handle that?

## Author Bio

Debra Dean was born and raised in Seattle. At Whitman College, she double-majored in English and Drama. After college, she worked in the New York and regional theatre for nearly a decade and met her husband when they were cast as brother and sister in A.R. Gurney's play *The Dining Room*. She received her MFA from the University of Oregon and has taught creative writing and literature since 1990. She now lives in Miami where she teaches in the MFA program at Florida International University.

Dean is the author of three books: *The Mirrored World* (Fall, 2012); *Confessions of a Falling Woman*, short stories (2008); and her debut novel, *The Madonnas of Leningrad* (2006), which has been published in twenty languages and remains a perennial book group favorite.

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